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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the adjustment of South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) immigrant children in the United States focuses on the experience of these children in schools, and particularly on differences in learning styles. Results of interviews with three elementary school children, one from each of the three countries in question, are summarized. The interviews focused on the children's approaches to learning and studying, parental expectations and academic standards, native and second language use at home, language use and attitudes at school, classroom procedures and environment, and what the children missed about their home cultures. Some cultural traits that may be useful for teachers to understand are discussed briefly. Contains 8 references. (MSE)

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South-Asian Immigrants - Living In Two Cultures

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1

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Abstract

The following paper discusses the differences in learning styles among the South-Asian children and the way they overcome cultural barriers, to be like their classmates. The children growing up with different values is reflected in their classrooms. A few students were interviewed on their views regarding the American school system and trying to live in two cultures. The paper also discusses why it is important for teachers to acknowledge these cultural values and to be able to show more understanding through their teaching styles.

Living in Two Cultures

The continent of America has been attracting immigrants for many decades. These are people that are in search of a free and happy life and are willing to endure hardships and social and cultural changes. They learn to adapt to the American ways of life and education, participate in politics and accept the economic opportunity that is equally accessible to all.

The adjustment of immigrant families depends on their ability to overcome the conflicts that are associated with some drastic cultural changes. They have to buy into new beliefs and different codes of behavior and learn to face prejudices and miscommunications because of their differences.

Among the immigrants the children from South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), are an expanding ethnic group in the United States public schools. The majority of the Asian-American students are first generation immigrants that have come to this country in recent years and have brought with them some schooling experiences from their native homeland which is quite different from those of whites and other ethnic groups. In the Asian countries the boys and girls usually go to separate schools. They learn through rote memorization and there are hardly any interactive or experimental learning experiences. Classrooms are highly structured and dominated by the teacher. They do not have small group activities. These are students that come from a highly structured and controlled classroom to an open and very flexible American classroom environment.

This has always been a nation of immigrants and the principal flow for hundreds of years was Europeans. But in the past decade the population influx from South Asia has reached high levels. Our schools have never been as universal nor our population so varied. (Perrone, 1991, p. 45) Our ability to let every child have a chance to succeed depends upon the full understanding of the cultures of the students. We respond differently to diversity. Schools should realize that diversity is not a problem, but rather

an opportunity for every American to experience other peoples and their cultures. According to Darlene Fierro schools play a significant role in the coming together of different cultures which exist within the society. (Fierro, 1997) Schools should have specific ways to promote pride in their ethnic language and culture. They can provide opportunities for children from the same ethnic groups to communicate with each other during cooperative learning. Teachers can display pictures and objects from the various cultures represented in the school. Integrating ethnic content into the curriculum is also very important. Teachers should teach the entire ethnic concept, rather than just fragments of information. As Gay points out that fragmented and isolated units, courses, and bits of information about ethnic groups interspersed sporadically into the school curriculum and instructional program will not do the job. Nor will additive approaches wherein the school curriculum remains basically the same, and ethnic content becomes an appendage (Gay, 1975, pp. 176-159) This is where classes visit other cultures from time to time and then return to the mainstream culture. This kind of a tourist curriculum emphasizes the exotic differences between cultures, while actually ignoring the experiences of diverse groups.

Banks suggests that the structure, nature and goals of the curriculum should be changed so as to enable students to view concepts, issues and problems from several ethnic perspectives. (Banks, 1993, pp.195-214) This approach will focus more on infusing various perspectives, frames of reference and content from groups that tend to students understanding of the nature, development and complexity of the society in this country.

The challenges of American schooling can be overwhelming. Some ethnic minority children, especially Asians, face problems from the moment they enter the American schools. These problems are of three kinds: there is the problem of the non-English speaking child, of approaching his school work with the linguistic capacity he or she actually commands; there is the problem of maintaining his or her skill in the mother tongue; and there is the problem of acquiring sufficient English to be able to work with as the medium of instruction. (Grugeon & Woods, 1990, p.19)

The main need for these children is language development, particularly enrichment of the English vocabulary. For most of these pupils, English is a second language, not spoken at home. Everyday phrases that are used outside schools are generally in the mother-tongue. Although these students do pick up the language of the playground and the basics, they still lack the vocabulary necessary to express themselves. These minority students also have difficulty adjusting to a classroom with different social interactions. Thus students that speak a language other than English are reluctant to give up that connection to their culture. When students discover that the way they talk is not respected in school, they develop a negative attitude towards schools.

According to Bredakamp, in the United States the predominant early childhood philosophy views formal academic instruction as inappropriate and harmful to the social and academic development of young children. (Bredakamp, 1990) Asian-American parents obviously do not believe in this philosophy. They use the formal teaching methods from a very early age and schedule more of their children's time and set aside a period of time for their daily homework. These children tend to be highly competitive and individualistic. This is because they tend to be pushed by their parents to achieve academic excellence, which often means striving to be the best in class.

Recent years have witnessed increasing speculation about the academic success of Asian -American students. (Kao, 1995, pp.121-159) This is because of the relatively high socioeconomic standing of Asian Americans, a low rate of marital disruption and an almost problem free home environment. These children also have distinct cultural values, such as conformity to authority and respect for elders and a high emphasis on learning. (Park, 1997.) Those children that have had some schooling in their native countries exhibit some of these characteristics. This is because humility and silence are cultural traits that are valued among the Asians. These are students that do not want to show off what they know, neither do they want to lose face in class in case their answers are not correct.

Interviewing the Children

As there are an increasing number of South Asian children in our school I was able to interview three students, one each from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. They were two girls Rabeena and Farida aged eight, and ten and a seven year old boy named Pradeep. I questioned their views regarding the American schooling and the strategies that their parents used for them to keep up their academic work. The girls mentioned that they had to do extra homework everyday which they resented. Their explanation was that none of their other classmates did any extra studies. They had to do extra work in Math and Reading so as to maintain higher grades in the class. According to the girls after they had completed their work, their parents would quiz them on their times tables. They also had workbooks that their parents had bought for them for extra practice. Asian parents have very strict rules about maintaining high grades and the girls mentioned that if their grades dropped, they were punished at home. On the other hand these parents did not have any rules about doing chores around the house. These parents placed greater emphasis on the importance on school work over all other responsibilities the child may have at home.

I asked them about the language they spoke at home and how did they feel about switching to another language in school and did they feel comfortable doing so. All three mentioned that they spoke in their mother tongue with their parents especially with their mothers. This was because they instinctively felt that their mothers would feel comfortable communicating in their native language. The parents want to maintain their language in order for the children to communicate with their relatives when they returned for a visit. Since they were not very fluent in English when they first started schooling in the United States the children found it very difficult to understand their teachers. When interviewed Rabeena said, "The teachers talk a little differently and so I found it difficult to understand what she was saying." Pradeep the seven year old from India complained that the children made fun of his accent when he spoke and that sometimes the children in his class would

ask him questions just to hear him speak with his accent. But since he began getting good grades in Math and Reading he felt very proud of himself. When I interviewed him he still had a very distinct accent whereas the girls had lost theirs and had acquired an American accent. Although they made many grammatical mistakes while speaking they had got over their shyness to speak the language. These second language learners should not be left to "pick-up" incidental language from their peers. Collaborative small group talk may also be beneficial if it is structured and encouraged by teachers. The promotion of talk in the classroom is particularly important for second language learners. They need access to the widest possible range of opportunities to communicate so that they can try out the rules that they are developing.

I asked the children their feelings about answering questions in class when called upon. The girls did mention that they felt shy because in case the answer was incorrect they worried that their classmates would laugh at them. Farida stated that, "If you answer wrong then the children laugh at you." Both the girls seemed very quiet whereas Pradeep was quite enthusiastic to answer the questions in class when I spoke to his teacher. The children mentioned that when they had come from their native countries they were surprised at the informality that existed between the teacher and student. It took them a long time to become accustomed to that. Teachers can better understand their Asian-American students by understanding some general cultural characteristics of Asians that impact their student's experience of American schooling.

South-Asians-Americans are among the few ethnic groups that travel back and forth to their native countries, at least once in two to three years. These are first generation immigrants and their children that have settled here in the United States but at the same time want to maintain close ties with their native countries. These parents want their children to maintain their culture as well as adapt to the American way of life. I asked the three children about their reaction to visiting their native countries. Only the ten year old had returned to Pakistan for a visit since they had come to the United States. The

other two had been here only for a year or two and were planning to visit during the summer. They were very excited and enthusiastic to tell me about their relatives and their lives there. But although they had good memories about their native countries they would rather stay here to avoid the pollution, over crowding and the poverty. I asked Rabeena who came from Pakistan how she felt when she was in Pakistan. She mentioned that because of her American accent people would stare at her when she spoke. Something she had experienced when she first began schooling here in the United States. She did enjoy meeting her relatives especially her cousins to whom she could describe American life in detail. People there were very interested in the schooling system of the United States. She mentioned that they wanted to know in detail everything she did in school including the kinds of books she used. Her relatives were quite surprised that the children in the lower grades did not have a lot of textbooks like the children back home.

I asked the children what they missed the most about their native countries and all three stated that they did not have the freedom to go out and play whenever they wanted unless there was parental supervision. They wished that neighborhoods were more safe so that children could have that freedom. The girls mentioned that they also missed not being able to wear their native clothes. Although they were very comfortable the children stared at them in school when they wore it a few times. Now they only wore dresses or pants like their peers. In spite of the cultural barriers, all three preferred to studying in the United States because they felt that the teachers were less strict and more understanding towards the children's problems.

Conclusion

Thus we see that these South -Asian children despite their initial difficulty with English and the differences between home and school cultures, are a group in their own unique way. They are learning to come to terms with their bilingualism in a multicultural situation. Although they have to work twice as hard as their classmates it is well worth

the work. They seem to be doing well in academics with the support of the parents although it took them a while to get accustomed to the American system. These children were able learn the English language as well as maintain their mother tongue. We see the Asian students are quiet in class and very disciplined as they would be if they were in school in their own native countries. Children from the South - Asian countries try very hard to overcome the language and culture barriers in order to assimilate into the American society. They work hard to maintain good grades for fear of being punished at home. These educational practices that work for Asian-American children may work because they are congruent with the overall value system of that culture. Whereas the same practices used by European American parents may not be effective because they are incompatible with other aspects of the culture. These children appear to be benefiting from their parent's formal structured approach to academic learning and have not developed any emotional problems that may affect their psychosocial development.

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